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Foundation Neuss**

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THE COLLECTION OF JAPANESE ART BY VICTOR AND MARIANNE LANGEN, LANGEN FOUNDATION

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“Kunst ist ein Bedürfnis”¹ – The Collection

“Art is a necessity”: Viktor Langen (22.03.1909–02.01.1990) thus described the concept behind his collecting activities, one which is reflected throughout the collection. The collection is repeatedly described as “non-professional” by the founders themselves (LANGEN and LANGEN 1984: 1; MURASE 1998: 9). That is to say, it was based on the collectors’ personal appreciation of the material. It covers a wide range, from modern European painting to the religious and secular arts of Asia. The latter comprises 540 pieces of objects from Japan, China, and Korea, as well as Indian and Khmer culture. The category of Japanese art alone, numbering 340 pieces, covers Jōmon clay objects as well as Nara- and Heian-period Buddhist statues. It spans a vast area of painting, including examples of court paintings presented by the Kanō School², as

well as works by Rimpa artists³, renowned painters such as Maruyama Ōkyo⁴, and genre painting reaching into the 19th century. There are also a few additional pieces of *verre églomisé* – drawing attention to the unprejudiced nature of the collection. The sculptural department includes Noh-masks, cloisonné, ceramics, for example a piece by Nonomura Ninsei⁵, lacquer-ware, with an obvious Negoro⁶ piece,

century.

³ Beginning with the artists Tawaraya Sōtatsu and Hon’ami Kōetsu in the Momoyama period, this school is represented by a loose chain of self-proclaimed artists who dedicate themselves to a revived classical style heavily based on Heian period literature.

⁴ Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–1795), a Kyoto painter active in the mid-Edo period, establisher of the Maruyama school.

⁵ Nonomura Ninsei (dates unknown), a potter born in Kyoto and active in the first half of the Edo period. He is regarded as the establisher of polychrome Kyoto ware.

⁶ A type of lacquer ware originally produced at the temple Negoro-ji from the Kamakura period onwards, the term is applied broadly to religious and secular lacquer dishes without decoration, finished with red lacquer that reveals the black

¹ <http://langenfoundation.de/ausstellungsarchiv-seiten/ausstellungsarchiv-2007/beduerfnis-kunst> (07.08.2013).

² Kanō School: the largest painting school in Japanese history, active as painters-by-appointment to the ruling shogunate from the 15th to 19th

as well as Rimpa-style lacquered boxes, such as a writing box ascribed to Hon'ami Kōetsu⁷.

The first remarkable feature of his collecting concept, and hence of the collection itself, is that it was inspired by visits to Japan and the works were mostly acquired in Japan, their country of origin. This is an important aspect when considering the quality of the pieces in this collection, which is unequalled among private collections, and which even surpasses many museum collections. Foreign collections of Japanese art frequently rely in their entirety on sources in the European art market or on existing collections. Viktor Langen visited Japan personally, accompanied by a translator. Despite his main occupation as a businessperson, he was in direct contact with Japanese art dealers, as well as choosing the objects himself.

Furthermore, Victor Langen always acquired the pieces in mutual agreement with his wife, Marianne (07.12.1911–14.02.2004), so the dynamism of both can be seen as the decisive energy behind the collection. This method makes the collectors' choices and understanding of the works apparent, as they did not seek any professional, art historical guidance, except for a few basic recommendations from Japanese collectors and restorers. This resulted in its second remarkable feature of the collection, which is its pure nature that is based on intuitive understanding and personal taste.

Marianne and Viktor Langen have explained that they focused on "things that are unique", which meant that from the beginning they avoided mass-produced or replicated objects. This is the reason why the otherwise extremely popular genre of *ukiyo-e*⁸, specifically *nishiki-e*, found in almost all

base lacquer.

⁷ Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), a versatile artist and sword connoisseur.

⁸ *Ukiyo-e*: 'pictures of floating world', a genre of Japanese art established early in the Edo period (1603–1868), dealing with popular topics. It can



Fig. 1: Fukūkenjaku Kannon. Muromachi period, 16th century. Hanging scroll, ink and polychromy on silk; 100 x 39 cm. © Langen Foundation, Neuss (Inv. no. J527). See also colour illustration C14.

be broadly divided into the two categories of the painted *nikuhitsu-ga*, and the printed *nishiki-e* ('brocade pictures').



Fig. 2: Emma-ten. Muromachi period, 15th century. Hanging scroll, polychromy on silk; 109 x 39.5cm. © Langen Foundation, Neuss (Inv. no. J122).

Western collections of Japanese art, is entirely absent here. It is represented only by paintings (*nikuhitsu-ga*), such as the works by Okumura Masanobu⁹ or a piece formerly ascribed to

⁹ Okumura Masanobu (1686–1764), a painter active in the early Edo period with strength in

Dōshu¹⁰. Their criteria of collecting do not imply any preoccupation with the art and culture of Japan. It is rather intended to challenge the common belief that Japanese (or any Eastern Asian art form) is entirely reclusive and inaccessible to the Western appreciator of fine art – a very intriguing criterion indeed.

Their relentless efforts to understand the original setting of their objects – such as temple halls – as well as their modest approach toward foreign culture, formed a presentation that respects the nature of the objects and recognises their value. Since 2004, the collection has been showcased in the Langen Foundation building that was designed by the architect Andō Tadao at the former NATO rocket-base near Neuss, Germany.

*Japanese Buddhist Art in the Langen Foundation Collection*¹¹

The Japanese collection, including the works of religious art, has been gradually established since the early 1960s, when Victor Langen began his business visits to the Japanese automobile industry. He had already developed a passion for art in his youth, as well as the experience of acquiring artworks though the collecting of modern European painting, which he and his wife had begun a decade before venturing into Japanese art. The religious works comprise mostly Buddhist art with a few pieces of Shintō art, but are limited to sculpture and painting, with the one exception of a Negoro ware piece (J228) (LANGEN and LANGEN 1984: 270).

the paintings of actors and beauties, producing *nishiki-e* as well as *nikuhitsu-ga*.

¹⁰ Kaigetsudō Dōshu (dates unknown), painter of the early Edo period with strength in the paintings of beauties in the tradition of his master Kaigetsudō Andō.

¹¹ See also the contribution by KAWAI Masatomo “The Buddhist Art of the Langen Collection” (2013).



Fig. 3: Guhari Amida Nyorai. Kamakura period, 14th century. Hanging scroll, polychromy on silk, *horinuri* technique; 95 x 53,5 cm. © Langen Foundation, Neuss (Inv. no. J545).

The collection has been extensively studied by Ariga Yoshitaka (Professor Emeritus at the Tōhoku University, Sendai, and specialist in religious painting), Kawai Masatomo (Professor Emeritus at the Keiō University, Tokyo, and specialist in monochrome painting), and Miyeko Murase (Professor Emeritus at Columbia University), and there have been two exhibitions with accompanying catalogues. The first was *Japan – 1,000 Years of Painting*, and the second was *Herbstwind in den Kiefern* (MURASE 1998). Both exhibitions provided insights into the objects in the collection, and the latter catalogue is an excellent source of art historical information on each object.

The major schools of Buddhism in Japan are represented through their objects: Jōdo,

Shingon, Zen, as well as the representations of Śhakyamuni common in many schools.

In comparison with other European collections of Japanese Buddhist art, the Langen collection stands out through its eye for the unusual object, as well as its once again apparent effort to pursue uniqueness.

A painting of Fukūkenjaku Kannon (J527, fig. 1) accompanied by the Four Guardian Kings with unique features strongly resembles the statue of the same Kannon at the Nanen-dō, Kōfuku-ji temple. This painting not only stands out for its refinement, but is



Fig. 4: Portrait of Ryōgen. Edo period, 18th century. Hanging scroll, polychromy on silk; 140 x 79 cm. © Langen Foundation, Neuss (Inv. no. J40). See also colour illustration C15.



Fig. 5: Sanjūbanshin. Muromachi period, 16th century. Hanging scroll, polychromy on silk, 84 x 71 cm. © Langen Foundation, Neuss (Inv. no. J145). See also colour illustration C13.

also strikingly unique due to its link to the specific Kōfuku-ji statue. Its use of a dark blue background is elegant and typical for its period. A representation of Emma-ten (J122, fig. 2) is also an exquisite example of its kind in European collections. Both works are dated to the Muromachi period. The painting of Guhari Amida dating to the Kamakura period also belongs to the more uncommon theme in Europe (J545, fig. 3). Fine Buddhist paintings are of such high quality that they can easily be compared to examples in Japanese collections. For example, the meditative expression of the Kokuzō Bosatsu (J539), dated to the Kamakura period, recalls the painting on the same subject in the Tokyo National Museum. It is noteworthy that a portrait of the Tendai abbot Ryōgen (J40, fig. 4) can be found amongst



Fig. 6: Monk or Hachiman. Heian period, 12th century. Assembled woodblock technique (*yosegi-zukuri*), wood with traces of polychromy, carved eyes (*chōgan*); H 66.5 cm. © Langen Foundation, Neuss (Inv.no. J288). See also colour illustration C7.

the few examples of founder portraits. Ryōgen is still popular today for his protective merits as Ganzan Daishi, yet not many examples of his portraits can be found in Europe. The portrait in the Langen collection is dated to the Edo period, the pinnacle of pilgrimage and amulet culture in Japan. A comparison with the Ryōgen portrait as daemon in the collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Zurich would be of further interest. The painting scroll of Sanjūbanshin (J145, fig. 5) is equally of profound interest, as it has no mentioning of the Nichiren odaimoku, thus should be considered to be a painting belonging to the Tendai School and would be useful for a study of the development of the Sanjūbanshin iconography.

A fine meditative expression can also be seen on the seated figure of a monk (J288, fig. 6). Its somewhat imprecise description stems from the absence of both hands, which would have revealed the true nature of this statue through the *mudra* (hand gesture), or attributes



Fig. 7: *Kanzan and Jittoku*. 17th century. Hanging scroll, ink on silk; 242 x 146 cm. © Langen Foundation, Neuss (Inv. no. J021).

(such as the wish-granting jewel). As the catalogue entry states, it is quite possible that it represented an early form of Jizō Bosatsu, or the deity Hachiman, even though Christine Guth describes Shinto sculpture to be rarely made of assembled wood in the early periods (GUTH KANDA 1985: 3), which has its plausible reasons, such as conserving the holy nature of entire divine tree trunks. The figure is dated to the late Heian period, 11th to 12th centuries, yet the stylistic features of the face are reminiscent of earlier examples, such as the group of Five Great Kokūzō Bosatsu statues at Jingo-ji temple, dated to the Jōwa era (834–848). It represents an outstandingly fine piece of religious sculpture, yet it would be intriguing to study its background, especially in connection with Heian Shingon sculpture.

The collection of Zen paintings (*zen-ga*) includes renowned artists such as Hakuin¹²

and Kawamura Jakushi¹³, in addition to several pieces ascribed to artists such as Sesshū¹⁴ or Kanō Sanraku¹⁵. Here, another remarkable anonymous piece should be mentioned, which is the painting of *Kanzan and Jittoku*¹⁶ (J021, fig. 7) dated to the 17th century. Its composition shows a very close resemblance to the painting of the same theme by Kanō Sansetsu, yet is inverted. The facial expression is very strong and appealing, reminiscent of the style of Soga Shōhaku. The strength of the collection lies in its line-up of paintings. It shows tendencies favoring strong lines, whether executed with an abundant use of gold or in monochrome ink. This can be seen in

¹³ Kawamura Jakushi (1638–1707), painter active in Nagasaki.

¹⁴ Sesshū Tōyō (1420–early 16th century), one of the most renowned Japanese painter in the monochrome ink painting genre.

¹⁵ Kanō Sanraku (1559–1635), a painter of the Kanō school active during the Momoyama period.

¹⁶ *Kanzan and Jittoku*: Japanese reading of the Chinese names Hanshan and Shide, two legendary monks from the Tang dynasty.

¹² Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1768), the reviver of the Rinzai Zen School in the mid-Edo period, renowned for his paintings.

both the polychrome paintings dating from the Kamakura to the Muromachi periods, and in the *zen-ga* pieces, most notably those painted by Hōsetsu Tōzen¹⁷, Suiō Genro¹⁸, Unkoku Tōeki¹⁹, and the two paintings ascribed to Sesshū.

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¹⁷ Hōsetsu Tōzen (dates unknown), a painter of the Muromachi period and disciple of Sesshū.

¹⁸ Suiō Genro (1717–1789), *zen-ga* painter and a disciple of Hakuin.

¹⁹ Unkoku Tōeki (1591–1644), a painter of the Unkoku school serving as court painters to the House of Mōri.

